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SUBJECT: JORDAN: MAYOR OF AJLOUN STRESSES THE NEED FOR
MAJOR REFORMS

REF: 09 AMMAN 1896

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (S/NF) The mayor of Ajloun said that national reforms are needed to halt growing discontent in his town. He is in favor of the proposed decentralization plan, saying that inefficient megaprojects have proven to be spectacular failures because they were designed by bureaucrats in Amman with no local input. When asked about electoral reform, the mayor said that true political reform cannot rely only on changes in the electoral law. Until citizens see a government that functions properly, they will continue to vote for tribal leaders who are viewed as the only service providers. End Summary.

Frank Discussion with a Young Mayor

¶2. (S/NF) Ajloun, a hilly town located 50 miles north of Amman, has a population of approximately 60,000. On January 27, PolChief met with Mamdooh Mustafa Al Zghool, the mayor of Ajloun, who was elected in 2007 at the age of 34. Al Zghool was surprisingly frank about a range of issues and held the closed meeting in his private office, rather than staging a formal event in the city council chambers, as some of his counterparts have done in other towns. (septel)

"Decentralization Can Work, But Will Take Time"

¶3. (S/NF) Al Zghool is eager for the government's proposed decentralization plan to be enacted. Although he is optimistic about the outcome, he believes it will take 10-15 years to be implemented effectively. The mayor is eager for reforms to be enacted in municipal governments, particularly in terms of public sector personnel. He explained that municipal employment had been used as a form of social welfare for decades, resulting in incompetence and inefficiency. Ironically, according to the mayor, municipal employment does not even produce satisfied citizens, who now demand a higher quality of life than a municipal salary can provide. "So we are paying a lot of money to people who do no work and are unhappy."

¶4. (S/NF) PolChief asked if the mayor thought municipalities would be given financial resources commensurate with their new responsibilities under the new plan. Al Zghool believes that training and capacity-building will be more important than an influx of funds. "With a great team behind me, I could do much more to help my community with smaller amounts of money. What we don't need are big-ticket megaprojects designed in Amman which address no community-identified

needs." He spoke with great disdain about the recent construction of a near-by judicial building. A large sum of money was used to purchase an inappropriate piece of land and the result was a poorly-constructed building in an inconvenient location with no public parking near-by.

"Until the Government Functions Properly, Electoral Reform Will Be Meaningless"

¶ 15. (S/NF) When asked about on electoral reform and the upcoming elections, Al Zghool said that he believes the 2010 elections will produce a parliament similar in content and competency to the one dismissed in 2009. "There must be a fundamental change in the way the government operates. Until then, people will continue to vote along tribal lines, which they view as the best way to preserve their own self-interests."

¶ 16. (S/NF) Al Zghool said three changes are needed to reform political life in Jordan:

-- Justice must be applied equally. Al Zghool said that for decades, the citizens of Ajloun have seen people with "wasta" (or connections) act with impunity. They have no faith that the government will punish wrong-doers, so they turn to the tribes to satisfy their sense of justice. This both empowers tribal leaders and leads to a power struggle between competing tribes, as evidenced by the outbreak of riots in Ajloun in August, 2009 (reftel).

-- The rule of law must be applied equally. Al Zghool said

AMMAN 00000276 002 OF 002

that corruption must be tackled aggressively to restore trust and a sense of "fairness" in both municipal governments and private businesses. He would like to see public officials perform their duties to local citizens without having to be prompted by bribes. Finally, he believes that business contracts should be awarded to those who demonstrate innovation and efficiency, not political savvy.

-- Equal opportunities must be presented to all. Al Zghool is disturbed to see the growing belief among the youth of Ajloun that dedication and hard work matter less than connections. "If one cannot get a job, a place at university or a spot in the army based on qualifications, why would you judge a politician by his personal qualifications and ability to do the job? No, people will continue to vote for those members of their own tribe who can deliver such favors and services."

Comment

¶ 17. (S/NF) The mayor's frank and thoughtful comments demonstrated a somewhat unusual bluntness for Jordanian municipal leaders. While he never crossed the line into outright criticism of the regime, he did say that problems with governance at the national level have a direct negative impact on the citizens of Ajloun.

¶ 18. (S/NF) Al Zghool is seen as a rising young leader. He has an undergraduate degree in urban planning and is currently pursuing a master's on the same topic. He was chosen to participate in a 2008 International Republican Institute (IRI) exchange program for young regional leaders, including Israelis, to view the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. He said this experience caused him to completely change his impression of the U.S. and its definition of democracy, which is often maligned in the Arab press. He also said he maintains contact with the Israeli participants, as the program showed him how to differentiate between Israeli individuals and the "troubling" actions of their government. In addition, al Zghool just returned from a poverty reduction program in Lebanon, sponsored by the Arab League for rising

young political leaders.
Beecroft